peeked into her bedroom. She'd pulled the blanket over her head. That jaunt cost her mother 300 dollars. "Brilliant," as Ellie liked to say.

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Ellie was addicted to fluids. She'd wrap her lips around the bathroom tap and suck back the whole water-works if she could. Then she'd pull up her T-shirt and rub her smooth stomach, swollen like a balloon. She'd moan "O-o-o-oh, that feels g-o-o-o-d." The disability allowance folks exhausted their meager ingenuity trying to get her extra money for plastic mattress covers, to divert pin money to pee money. Somewhere they got some emergency funding.

I suspected all along that it came out of her cigarette money, because that was when they cut her back to one cigarette every even hour. It was too much for mere co-incidence. It was their bright idea. Everything came out of that little blue Tupperware dish on the mantle.

Ellie looked glum. She shivered on the porch in her blue housecoat. I asked her if she liked Christmas. Oh yes, she said, it was her favorite holiday. She wanted to hang all New York City on the tree. "Brilliant."

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